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Post-WWII

James Thurber: 20 Funny Years With the FBI

"To hell with the handkerchief," said Walter Mitty scornfully. He took one last drag on his cigarette and snapped it away. Then, with that faint, fleeting smile playing about his lips, he faced the firing squad; erect and motionless, proud disdainful, Walter Mitty the Undefeated, inscrutable to the end."

Perhaps J. Edgar Hoover and his minions at the Federal Bureau of Investigation took James Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" seriously. Apparently mistaking Mitty's daydreams of derring-do for Thurber's real-life activities, they saw the nearly blind writer and cartoonist as not only inscrutable but possibly subversive.

So the FBI kept the often irascible but rarely political Thurber under surveillance for nearly 20 years, maintaining a file on his efforts to uphold something we all think is our birthright: the Bill of Rights.

Philosophically, Thurber was precisely what Hoover considered himself to be: a vigorous opponent of communism. Although Thurber generally eschewed ideology ("Art does not rush to the barricades," he once wrote), he openly scorned the writings of American Marxists as early as the 1930s, when the cause of the proletariat was popular among many writers and intellectuals.

Nevertheless, Thurber's basic, personal conservatism, instilled during a good Victorian upbringing in Columbus, Ohio, was constantly at loggerheads with his fiercely liberal attitude toward the civil and First Amendment rights of artists of every stripe. He was particularly distressed by any Red-baiting assaults on writers, who he felt were a special breed of artist requiring complete freedom. When the self-anointed guardians of the country's safety assembled the names of writers whose work they thought merited blacklisting, Thurber almost was sorry not to be included on the roster.

"If and when I am listed as an old Bolshevik," he wrote to a friend, "I will at least join the distinguished company of some of the Patriotic Americans whom I love and admire."

On other occasions, Thurber liked to boast that despite his open contempt for overblown advocates of "Americanism," the superpatriots left him alone. He proudly told an interviewer in 1958 that he had heard that a congressman once was asked why Thurber had



never been investigated and had timorously replied, "Because our wives and daughters wouldn't allow it."

"This is my proudest medal," Thurber gloated.

His delight might have dimmed had he known that the FBI actually had been keeping tabs on him since 1939.

Thurber had become suspect because, along with Ernest Hemingway, Dashiell Hammett and dozens of other well-known writers and artists, he was what Red-hunters later termed "prematurely anti-fascist." He had signed protest letters urging aid to the liberal and Communist-backed forces fighting the Fascists led by Francisco Franco in the Spanish Civil War. Thurber's occasional associations with other liberal groups kept the FBI's newspaper clippers and filing clerks fitfully on his trail until the 1950s.

Much of what is in Thurber's FBI file is repetitious, and the roster of those with whom he was linked contains some of the most distinguished names in American arts and letters. A February 1948 New York Times story, signed and preserved in the file along with a report of the California state senate's Committee on Un-American Activities, notes that Thurber joined Oscar Hammerstein II, Moss Hart, Walter Huston, Norman Rockwell, Agnes DeMille, Edna Ferber and dozens of others on a committee sponsoring a drive

to oppose "censorships of the arts" and offering its support to the Hollywood Ten, a group of screenwriters subsequently blacklisted and jailed for refusing to testify before the U.S. House of Representatives' Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC).

If the fact that Thurber had signed a liberal group's protest letter was mentioned in testimony before HUAC, or his name appeared in such suspect publications as the Daily Worker or People's World, into his FBI file went a copy of the HUAC transcript or the newspaper clipping. That Thurber was reported to be "disgusted" by the "Red-baiting activities in Equity" of his old friend and collaborator Elliott Nugent is far less astonishing than that such an item surfaced in so bourgeois a feature as a Broadway gossip column written for the Communist Daily Worker.

Among the earliest pieces in Thurber's 105-page FBI file is a list of the members of the League of American Writers, which included Van Wyck Brooks, Malcolm Cowley, Dorothy Parker, S. J. Perelman, Lillian Hellman, Irwin Shaw, Upton Sinclair and Carl van Doren, as well as Thurber. A "Dear Edgar" note, written by an anonymous informant to accompany this list, advised the ever vigilant FBI chief: "Here's a pretty good Directory of Communists."

Perhaps the most ironic item in Thurber's file can be found in a catalog for a benefit auction that was scheduled to occur at Delmonico Hotel in New York on Feb. 19, 1939. Among the signed cartoons Thurber donated for sale was an unpublished drawing, dated 1935 and captioned: "Come on—fall in line, buddy. We're chasing Reds!"

Undoubtedly Hoover wouldn't have appreciated the humor in that cartoon, nor the irony implicit in the decision of the U.S. Postal Service to issue a stamp last month honoring Thurber—the creator not only of Walter Mitty but of funny, incisive short stories, fables, essays, plays, children's books and cartoons—on the 100th anniversary of his birth.

It seems the postal service still hasn't decided whether to issue a stamp honoring Hoover.

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